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Rural Out-migration of Labours and Their Sufferings in the Migration Process: A Respondents Survey

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Abstract

This paper focused on the rural out migration of labours and their sufferings associated with the migration process of Malda District, West Bengal. This study is mainly based on primary data collected from the migrant labours of the district by respondent survey using semi-structured survey schedule. The migrant labours were interviewed to understand the causes of migration and the sufferings in their migration process. The study reveals that Malda district witnesses huge out migration of labour forces to different states of India and abroad too. Most of the migrating labours of Malda District used to migrate due to a host of factors such as shortage of agricultural land, low returns from agriculture, low wage rate, lack of gainful employment opportunities throughout the year etc. Lack of proper education and mass illiteracy leads to further deterioration in employment opportunities. Therefore, the large scale of the working labour force of this district is bound to migrate in search of lower level jobs in different states of our country and abroad also. The labours face a lot of problems during their journey period from their place of origin to their place of destination and vice versa. They are also suffering from shortage of living rooms, unsafe drinking water, malnutrition, unknown language and culture, unhealthy living conditions etc and in most cases they are bound to live in a small tent at their place of work. They lead sub-human life. As a result, numerous deaths occur because of falling from towers and buildings, various diseases attack them and they come back to their permanent place of residence with a difficult disease. Besides these, sexually transmitted diseases spread over them. On the other hand their spouses and siblings also lead a sub-standard type of life in their permanent place of residence in their absence.

Keywords: Out migration, primary data, employment opportunities, malnutrition, sub-human life.

1. Introduction

The migration stream of a region or country depends on its socio-economic advancement and political stability. In the developed socio-economic condition, the region becomes more labour importer than labour exporter (Hass, 2007). Apart from socio-economic advancement, the volume of migration also highly depends on the political stability of the concerned region. The village which has a high proportion of landless labours, unequal distribution of land, and a low man-land ratio, experiences a relatively high out-migration (Lipton, 1980). Rural out migration is more common in the less developed nations as it has high population densities and where urban-industrial development takes place very rapidly (Chandna, 2008). Agricultural production and labour out migration are the main livelihood strategies in the rural areas of West Bengal in general and Malda district in particular.

Though most of the labour out migration is intra national, a large number of international labour out migration has also been observed in the study area. Malda district is one of the leading producers of out migrating labours in the state and the country as well. These migrating labours are mostly uneducated, primarily unskilled and from very poor economic backgrounds, seeking any kind of economically gainful employment. Though most of the intra-national labour out migration is temporary in nature, the labours who migrate abroad use to stay there at least two to four years at a stretch. Large chunk of labours out migrate from this district due to a host of factors such as appalling poverty, mass unemployment, low income, low and uncertain wages, low productivity and high risk in agriculture, shortage of agricultural land, low returns in agriculture, uneconomic land holdings, lack of gainful employment opportunities round the

year etc. Malda district of West Bengal has been selected as the study area. The latitudinal extension of the study area is 24° 40' 20" N to 25° 32' 08" N and the longitudinal extension of 87° 45' 50" E to 88° 28' 10" E. The district consists of fifteen C.D. blocks viz. Harishchandrapur- I Harishchandrapur-II, Chanchal-I, Chanchal-II, Ratua-I, and Ratua-II, Manikchak, Gazole, Habibpur, Bamongola, Old Malda, English Bazar, Kaliachak-I, Kaliachak-II, Kaliachak-III According to 2011 Census, Malda district covers an area of 3733 sq. km which shares 4.2% of the total area of the state of West Bengal. The district has a total population of 3988845 persons which is roughly 7 times larger than the population size of Sikkim (6,10,577 persons), almost 4 times larger than Mizoram (10,97,206 persons), 3 times larger than Arunachal Pradesh (13,83,727 persons) larger than population size of Meghalaya (29,66,889) and Tripura (36,73,917 persons). The district occupies 58th rank in India (out of a total of 640) in terms of total population. The population density of the district is 1,071 persons per sq. km. (2,770 per sq. mile) and population growth rate over the decade 2001-2011 was 21.5%. The district occupies the second rank in terms of growth rate of population in the state with 21.24% which is much higher than the state average of 13.84%. The population growth rate and population density indicates the pressure of population on the district. Only 13.58% urban population while 86.42% resides in the countryside. The literacy rate is 61.73% wherein

the male and female literacy is 66.24% and 56.96% respectively (Census of India, 2011). The overwhelmed share of rural population and lower level of literacy indicate workforce pressure on the rural Malda and their unskilled nature respectively.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is mainly based on primary data. For this study, 240 migrant workers were interviewed. This interview was conducted from September, 2019 to February, 2025. The interviews were basically conducted at railway stations when they were waiting to board their train, during their journey on the train as their co-passenger, at tea stalls in their village or sometimes by visiting their residence. A semi-structured survey questionnaire was used for these interviews. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and observation methods were also incorporated to gather in-depth information.

Some of their workplaces were also visited to understand the nature of the jobs, their living conditions, and the challenges they face. Besides these, many conversations were held with the migrant worker's wife and children and neighbours to understand the troubles they were going through in the absence of their guardians cum breadwinner.

Some secondary sources of data such as District Census Handbook, District Human Development Reports etc. have been consulted as supplementary data.

Table 1: Demographic Indicators of the Respondents

Demographic Indicators		% of Respondents	Demographic Indicators		% of Respondents
Gender	Male	95	Primary Occupation	Cultivation	17
	Female	5		Agricultural Labourers	27
Age in Years	15-18	8		Daily Wage Earners	46
	18-30	43		Small Scale Business	2
	35-45	31		HHI Workers Including Bidi Workers	3
	45-55	14		Others	5
	55-65	4	Annual Income (Rs.)	<50000	2
Marital Status	Married	76		50000-100000	8
	Unmarried	24		100000-150000	15
Educational Status (Years of Schooling)	0	11		150000-200000	37
	1-4	14		200000-250000	13
	5-8	32		250000-300000	11
	9-10	27		300000-350000	7
	11-12	10		350000-400000	4
	13-15	6		>400000	3

Source: Field Survey, September 2018 to January 2025, Sample Size (N)=260

3. Migration Patterns in Malda District

The labour out migration trends of Malda district could easily be understood in the context of underlying socio-economic conditions prevailing in the district. High levels of intra-national and some cases of international labour out migration have eventually defined migration patterns of the district. According to the Human Development Report (Development and Planning Department, 2007), Malda district is one of the backward districts in the country. The economy is largely agrarian in nature. The combined shares of cultivators and agricultural labours are 52.08% of total workers in which 35.49% workers are agricultural labours (Census, 2011). The industrial development in the district is invisible. The district

with a huge population pressure has been unable to create employment opportunities for the workforce. Hence a large number of both skilled and unskilled labours in the district used to internally migrate to other states of the country and a few used to migrate abroad too, especially Arabian and African countries, in search of better gainful economic opportunities. The metropolitan cities of India are the chief magnet for the destination of the migrating labours. Besides, different states of India such as UP, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, M.P, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu etc have large pulling effect over the migrating labours of Malda District.

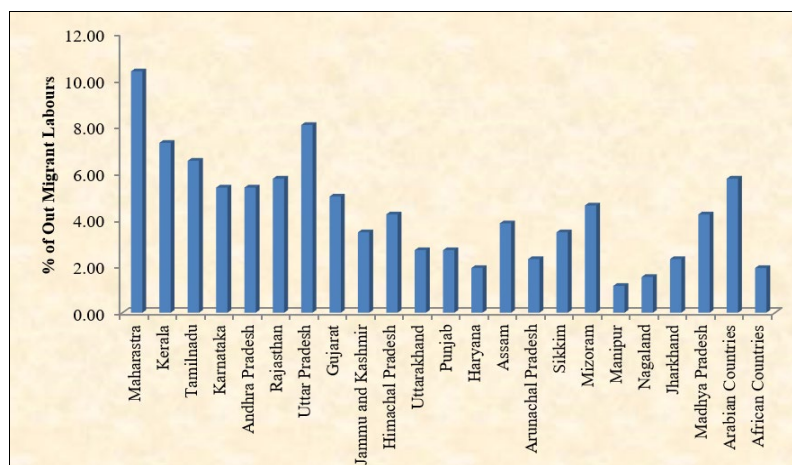


Fig 1: Spatial Pattern of Rural Out Migrant Labours of Malda District

The fig. 1 shows the spatial migration pattern of out migrating labours of the district, Maharashtra is the highest receiver of migrating labours of Malda district. The figure clearly revealed that the states of Deccan Plateau are the chief destination for migrating labours of the study area. The North-Eastern hilly states also have a great pulling effect over the migrating labours of Malda. Some Middle East countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar and even some African countries like South Africa, Libia, Chand etc. attract the labours of Malda district. As such, labour out migration seems to offer a pathway for the people of the study area to escape unemployment and poverty as migrants find better job opportunities and higher income elsewhere.

4. Sufferings of Out Migrant Labours

As per their reports, the sufferings of migrant workers can be categorised in the following ways:

- 4.1 Sufferings during Journey from Place of Origin to Place of Destinations and Vice- versa
- 4.2 Sufferings of Migrant Labours at Their Workplace
- 4.3 Sufferings of their kins at Households

4.1 Sufferings During Journey from Place of Origin to Place of Destinations and Vice-versa

The figure 2 exposes the widespread hardships that migrant workers face during their journey. The most prominent finding is that 94.2% of migrant workers use overcrowded means of transportation i.e. buses or trains without reservations, revealing gross unorganized and humane

transportation options for this vulnerable group. Furthermore, 75.8% of the respondents reported having no prior knowledge of their workplace which not only increases anxiety and uncertainty but also exposes them to greater risks of discombobulating and exploitation.

A significant number of migrants undergo intense psychological distress during their journeys as 73.1% have reported anxiety about leaving their family behind, and 64.2% felt anxious about the environment of an unknown place of work. These figures mark the emotional burden that migrants carry in addition to the physical toll of travel.

Many of them also suffer due to institutional negligence as 56.5% were harassed by railway officers i.e. the R.P.F. (Railway Protection Force) and T.T.Es. (Travel Ticket Examiners) often related to their identity or lack of documentation. Majority of the migrants (55.8%) complained that their basic rights and safety have also been compromised as they are not provided with sufficient food by the contractors during their journey.

Besides these, there are some other form of hardships which include false promises by contractors about wages and work conditions (24.2%), financial exploitation during recruitment and payments (9.2%), lost belongings due to unsafe conditions on the train (6.5%), pointing to manipulation and deceit that begin before the workers even arrive at their jobs. Some migrants also reported being sick or injured during travel (3.9%), or experiencing unmerited custody by Border Security Force (3.5%), which adds to the extreme stress and danger of out migration.

Table 2: Sufferings during Journey from Place of Origin to Place of Destination and Vice- versa

Code No.	Nurture of Sufferings	Migrants Workers (%)
1	Financial exploitation in the name of recruitment	9.23
2	False promises about their wage rates and working conditions at the destination	24.23
3	Travel in overcrowded bus or train without reservation	94.23
4	Experience of Harassment by Railway Police Force (RPF) and Travel Ticket Examiners (TTE) in the name of their identity etc.	56.54
5	Lost their belongings due to unsafe travelling	6.54
6	Lack of food during Journey	55.77
7	Unsafe drinking water	37.31
8	No knowledge about their workplaces	75.77
9	Experience of abuse and harassment by unknown co-passengers	4.23
10	Unnecessary detentions by local border officials and police	3.46
11	Sick or injured due to long journey in overcrowded bus or train	3.85
12	Anxiety about unknown place, work environment	64.23
13	Anxiety about family leaving behind	73.08

Source: Field Survey, September 2018 to January 2025, Sample Size (N)=260

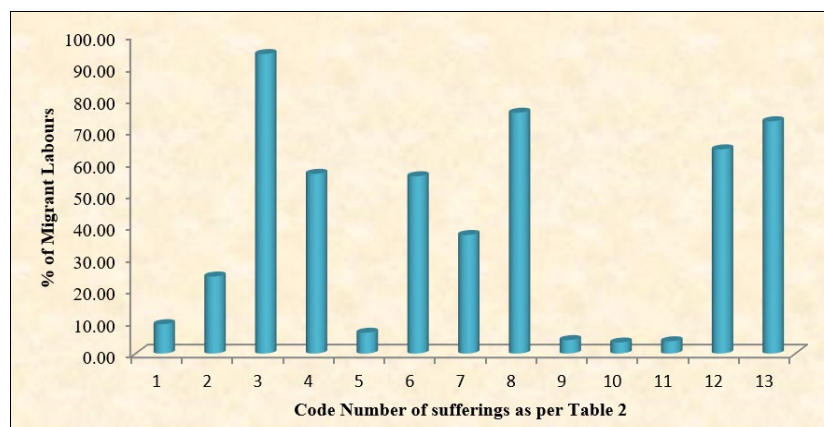


Fig 2: Sufferings of Migrant Labours during their Journey

Although certain issues affect a few workers-such as abuse by co-passengers (4.2%); they still signify the vulnerability and lack of protection migrants face throughout their journey. Overall, figure 2 paints a grim picture of the migrants' journey, dominated by unsafe travel conditions, emotional strain, and systemic neglect, making it clear that policies and interventions must address not only destination challenges but also the critical phase of transit.

4.2 Sufferings of Migrant Labours at Their Workplaces

The figure 3 reveals a troubling landscape of deprivation, exploitation and psychological distress that characterizes the day-to-day hard realities of many migrant workers. One of the most striking issues reported is the lack of access to proper sanitation, affecting 76.9% of workers-an alarming indicator of the unhygienic and unsafe living conditions in which these labourers are housed. Closely related, 73.9% of respondents

cited living in makeshift shelters, and 71.9% experienced loneliness due to isolation from family, reflecting both poor living arrangements and the emotional toll of migration.

Equivalently, concerning is that over half (58.5%) of the migrants suffered from delayed or unpaid wages, revealing organized wage exploitation that undermines the very purpose of migration i.e. economic betterment. Health-related risks are also widely experienced, with 52.3% exposed to extreme temperatures, and 40.4% each reporting lack of access to clean drinking water and healthcare services, which significantly elevate the vulnerability of this group to illness, injury, and chronic health disease.

Psychological issues are also notable: 37.7% reported fear of job loss or deportation, indicating a high level of insecurity and mental stress in the absence of legal or social protections. Meanwhile, 35.4% reported receiving low-quality food, compounding the issue of inadequate basic living standards.

Table 3: Sufferings of Migrant Labours at Their Workplace

Code No.	Natures of Sufferings	Migrant Labourers (%)
1	Wages unpaid or not paid on time	58.46
2	Supply low quality of food	35.38
3	Lack of safety measure during work cause accidents, injury even death	15.00
4	Health risks due to exposures to extreme hot and cold conditions	52.31
5	Makeshift shelters	73.85
6	Unhygienic and overcrowded dormitories	10.38
7	Lack of access to safe drinking water	40.38
8	Lack of access to proper sanitation	76.92
9	Lack of access to healthcare services	40.38
10	Physically abused by employers or locals	6.54
11	Racial discrimination	9.62
12	Cultural discrimination	14.23
13	Problem faced due to proper documents or lack of proper work permits	8.46
14	Harassed by local police	7.31
15	Loneliness due to long time isolation from family or relatives	71.92
16	Psychological distress fear of job loss and deportation	37.69

Source: Field Survey, September 2018 to January 2025, Sample Size (N)=260

Though less frequent, serious human rights concerns persist, 15% faced lack of safety at work leading to accidents or even fatalities. Racial (9.6%) and cultural (14.2%) discrimination and physical abuse by employers or locals (6.5%) further point to hostile and exploitative work environments. Additionally, challenges like lack of proper documentation (8.5%) and harassment by police (7.3%) highlight the precarious legal status many migrants face, making them

vulnerable to abuse and limiting their ability to seek justice. Overall, the Figure 3 illustrates that migrant workers often endure severe exploitation, substandard living conditions, health risks, and psychological burdens at their workplaces. These insights call for urgent reforms in labour rights enforcement, provision of essential services, and protective legal frameworks to safeguard the dignity and well-being of migrant workers.

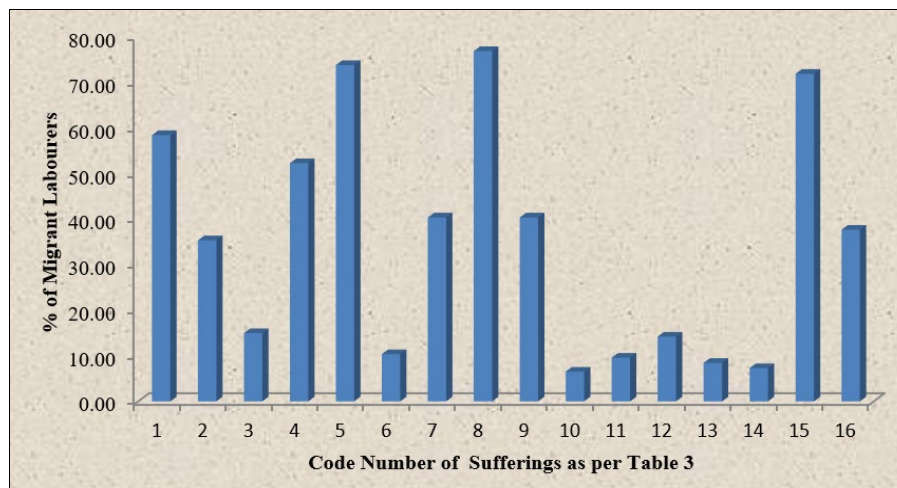


Fig 3: Nature of Sufferings at the Workplace

Table 4: Sufferings at Their Households

Code No.	Natures of Sufferings	Migrant Workers (%)
1	Financial difficulties due to the absence of bread earner	65.00
2	Irregular and uncertain income	40.38
3	Financial distress due to delayed payment by employers	62.69
4	Fall in debt to meet migration expenses	8.08
5	Not getting job at their own locality due to long time gap	16.15
6	Family members face social discriminations	4.23
7	Women insecurity due to long time absence of male members	12.31
8	Loneliness and depressions of their loved ones	45.77
9	Emotional and behavioural issues of children without parental guidance and supervision	10.38
10	Limited access to healthcare and education	13.08
11	Drop out of children from school education	14.23
12	Feeling of uncertainty about future income	21.92
13	Families fall into extreme financial crisis due to sudden job loss, illness, or death of the migrant workers	12.69

Source: Field Survey, September 2018 to January 2025, Sample Size (N) =260

4.3 Sufferings at Their Households

The figure 4 exposes that out migration, while often pursued for better economic opportunities, foist substantial burdens on the families left behind. The most common issue, affecting 65% of the households, is financial stress caused by the absence of the primary breadwinner, indicating that the

income generated throughout migration is insufficient, and inconsistent. Closely following is financial strain due to delayed employer payments (62.7%), further exacerbating household financial vulnerability and curbing timely access to basic needs.

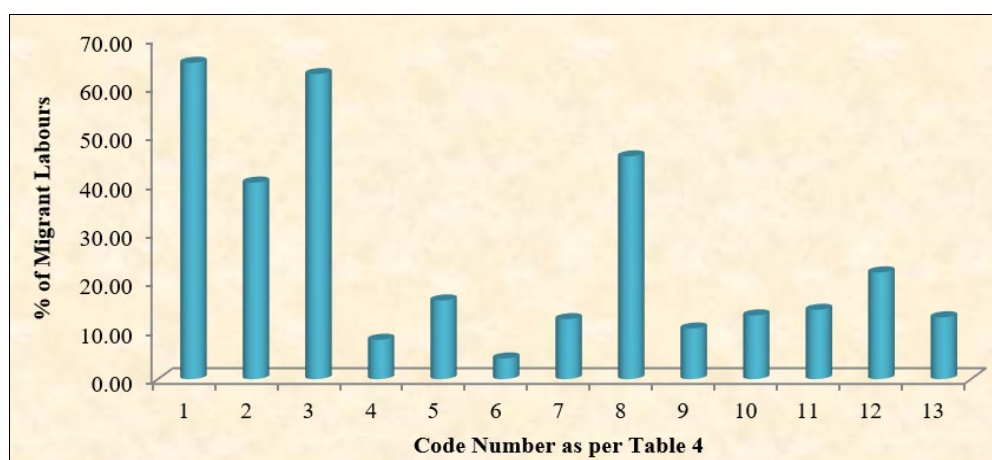


Fig 4: Sufferings at Their Households

Beyond financial burdens, the data indicates significant emotional and psychological effects. About 45.8% of households reported loneliness coupled depression among loved ones, and 10.4% observed behavioral and emotional problems in their children, highlighting the effect of prolonged separation from parental figures. The irregularity and uncertainty of migrant's income (40.4%) adds to this stress, fostering an environmental instability and unpredictability.

Other troubles include children dropping out of schools (14.2%), limited access to education and healthcare (13.1%), and women's insecurity in the prolonged absence of their male members (12.3%). These sufferings reflect the social costs of out migration, particularly in the contexts of lacking robust community and institutional support.

Although less frequently reported, households facing extreme financial crises due to sudden job loss, illness, or death of the migrant workers (12.7%) and falling into debt to cover migration expenses (8.1%) underscore the fragility of household resilience in the face of unexpected hardships. Additionally, some families experienced social discrimination (4.2%), showing that stigmatization can accompany or follow the migration process.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that migration is not just a labour movement; it is a complex socio-economic event with ripple effects on family well-being, requiring holistic and inclusive strategies that address not only the out migrant labours but also their household members.

5. Suggestions for Remedial Measures and conclusion

A comprehensive outline of actionable measures must be addressed to mitigate the challenges the migrant labours face across the entire migration process.

I. Safe and Dignified Journey

- Transportation system should be organized. Governments should provide dedicated bus or special trains with reserved seating for migrant workers during their migration in general and particularly in peak migration seasons.
- The Department of Labour, Government of West Bengal must supervise the entire migration process. The department should arrange some workshops and training programs on migration help lines, legal rights, and job guidelines etc. The government of the receiving regions of these migrants should keep their eyes on them.
- Both the Governments of the source and the receiving regions of these migrants should arrange Travel Assistance Kiosks (TAK) at major transit points to assist migrant labours in their need.
- For safe inter-state movement and emergency support coordination among the states must be improved for the betterment of these migrants.

II. At the Workplaces: Ensuring Security, Dignity & Legal Rights

- The governments must enforce labour laws to ensure decent working conditions, timely wage payments and no forced or bonded labours. The Labour Commissioner of Malda District should prepare a list of the labour *thekedar* (contractors) to manage the entire labour out migration process to ensure security, dignity and legal rights of the migrants.
- Provision of basic amenities like availability of drinking water, medical care, sanitation facility and safety gear at workplaces, Affordable, safe and

hygienic accommodations should be ensured by the concerned company, organization or employer.

- Provision of accessible and functional local grievance cells, mandatory insurance against work-related death, injuries or illness and labour help lines should be there to mitigate the immediate problems of migrants.

III. At the Household Level: Assisting Families Left Behind

- The educational and financial literacy of the migrant labours is very poor. Hence policy of financial inclusion such as financial literacy campaign, digital payments, easy access to banking, and remittance systems are very essential for their regular income flow and for the protection of migrant labours and their family members from the fraudsters.
- The government must ensure the social security of the migrant families through social welfare schemes e.g., Public Distribution System, education and healthcare.
- The government should launch community-based schemes to ensure women's safety and children's education and healthcare. The family of the migrant workers also needs psycho-social support to cope with stress, loneliness, and prolonged family separation.

IV. Organizational and Policy-Level Interventions

- District wise compulsory registration of migrant labours is very essential for a national database to track, support, and provide necessary benefits to migrant workers. The government should provide free health insurance, pension for old age and severely injured migrant workers, and a single family-ration card to protect the migrant's family from unpredicted misery.
- With help of the government and collaboration of NGOs, the district administration of Malda district should give skill training to the youths along with migrant labours for better employment opportunities and to reduce dependency on out migration and informal or exploitative recruitments. Regular monitoring of recruitment agencies and labour *Thekedar* is the need of the hour to prevent false job promises and financial exploitation of migrant labours.

Conclusion

A coordinated and multifaceted effort, involving employers, government agencies, civil society, and the migrants themselves are essential for improving the lives and livelihoods of migrant labourers. The policy of migration for out migration of labours must be inclusive, privilege-based, and responsive, aiming not only to avert sufferings but also to encourage opportunity, dignity, and stability for migrant labours and their family members.

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